https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ambarisa_offers_the_youth_Sunahsepha_in_sacrifice.jpg

Sunashepa: Bali Ka Bakra

Does Putra Moha blind us to the flaws of our children? As parents, are we doing our best to rectify the erroneous thoughts of our children? Do we sensitize them to the pain of others? This not so popular story from the Devi Bhagavatam fills us with horror and also makes us question our roles as parents.

Harishchandra, the king of Ayodhya has no heir even after years of marriage. Vashishta, his Guru says that Varuna, the Sea-God can grant him what he desires. Harischandra performs a Yagna to invoke Varuna. And as predicted by Vashishta, Varuna appears before Harishchandra and says, “You shall be blessed with a son. But only if you promise to give me your son after he is born.”

Harishchandra is desperate for a son. So he agrees to Varuna’s condition. Within a year, Harishchandra’s wife, Saivya gives birth to a beautiful son. Harishchandra loves his son, Rohita, so much that he completely forgets the promise he had made to Varuna.

Varuna appears before Harishchandra the very next day and asks him for the child. Harishchandra quickly says, “A new born child is unclean. You can take him from me after 10 days.” When Varuna comes to him after 10 days Harishchandra says, “My son is destined to be a Yagna Pasu. And a Yagna Pasu must

have teeth. Let Rohita cut his teeth. I will offer him to you after that.” When Varuna visits Harishchandra after Rohita cuts his first tooth, the king says, “Rohita needs to grow new teeth. Only then can a Yagna Pasu become a pure offering for a Yagna.”

Harishchandra keeps postponing the inevitable by making some excuse or the other. He loves his son so much that he does not even think of the consequences of not keeping the promise he made to Varuna. Several years pass in this manner. Rohita grows up to become a strapping young lad. One day, out of sheer nervousness, Harishchandra tells Rohita about the promise he had made to Varuna. Rohita is shocked when he hears of this and runs away from his father’s palace.

When Varuna comes to know of this, he curses Harishchandra and says he will waste away to death with Mahodara, a disease that affects all the organs of the belly. When Rohita hears of Varuna’s curse, he decides to offer himself to Varuna. But Indra appears before Rohita, asks him to go on a pilgrimage to all the Teerthas in Bharatvarsha and assures him that his father will recover if he does so.

Rohita obeys Indra’s orders and is relieved when he hears of his father’s recovery. But a year later, Harishchandra is afflicted by the same disease again. Rohita sets off on another pilgrimage again and Harishchandra too recovers again. This happens repeatedly. But Harishchandra never recovers from the disease completely.

During one such Teerth Yatra, Rohita meets a poor Brahmin, Ajigartha and his three grown up sons. A bizarre thought strikes Rohita. He says, “O Ajigartha, I will give you a thousand cows if you give me one of your sons in return.” Ajigartha asks him why he is making such a strange request and wants to know what Rohita would do with one of his sons.

Rohita tells him the entire story and says, “I will offer one of your sons as the Yagna Pasu in the Yagna and fulfil my father’s promise to Varuna.” Ajigartha looks at his sons and considers the sorry plight that they are in. He loves them. He does not want to part with any of them. However he says, “I cannot part with my eldest son. He is dearer to me than life.” Ajigartha’s wife holds her youngest son to her chest and says, “I love my youngest son more than I love myself. How can I give him to you?”

SunaShepa, the middle son, stares at his parents in utter disbelief. Tears flow down his face as the reality dawns on him – that his parents were willing to sell him for a few cows. He turns to Rohita and says, “Prince of Ayodhya, I don’t mean much to my parents. They can live without me. The love that my parents have for me is worth a thousand cows. Take me with you. I am willing to become the Yagna Pasu of your father’s Yagna.”

Rohita is happy that he has found a way to extend his own life. He is totally immune to the pain of a poor Brahmin boy. Rohita and Sunashepa leave for Ayodhya immediately. They halt for a while at Pushkara to refresh themselves. Sunashepa wonders

how his parents could disown him like that and curses his own fate. But he is also petrified of his impending death at the Yagna Shala. He sobs his heart out whenever he is alone.

One day, he spots Rishi Vishwamitra meditating under a tree. Sunashepa flings himself at the Rishi's feet, tells him the entire story and says, "I do not want to break the promise that my parents' gave Rohita. I don't want to ruin the Yagna because of my fear of death. But I do not want to die either. Help me O great sage for I have no one else to turn to."

Vishwamitra looks at Sunashepa and says, "Go with Rohita without any fear in your heart. They will tie you to the Yagna Sthamba with ropes that are purified with chants. They will smear you with red sandalwood paste and make you wear flower garlands. I will teach you two mantras. You must sing these mantras after they do all this to you. No harm will come to you. The Yagna will be complete and you will get to live a long life too. Go now in peace - for victory is in the air for all of you now."

Sunashepa does not discuss any of this with Rohita. They visit Harishchandra as soon as they reach Ayodhya. Harishchandra is confined to a dark room due to his disease but is happy to hear about Rohita's solution. He asks his men to prepare for the Yagna. Five men carry Harishchandra to the Yagna Shala and start performing the Yagna.

Harishchandra's love for his own son, Rohita makes him insensitive to the plight of the poor Brahmin boy. He thinks of Sunashepa as a mere Yagna Pasu. The priests invoke the Sea

God, Varuna, tie Sunashepa to the Yagna Sthamba, anoint him with red sandal wood paste, drape floral garlands around his neck and prepare to sacrifice him.

And Sunashepa starts singing the hymns that Vishwamitra had taught him - in a loud, unbroken beautiful voice. When the priests listen to the words of the hymns they are surprised because only learned scholars can master such sacred chants. Sunashepa continues to sing with devotion and much to everyone’s amazement, the Devi herself appears there along with Indra and Varuna. Varuna liberates Harishchandra from his promise and revokes his curse.

Harishchandra realizes his folly: Excessive Putra Moha. He seeks forgiveness from Sunashepa and decides to learn the profound Brahma Vidya from Vishwamitra. Yes, this is the same king Harischandra who is renowned for keeping his promises. The war of Mahabharata too was waged because a blind father is blinded by the love that he has for his son and does not stop him when he makes mistakes repeatedly.

We all love our children. We should. That is natural. But let the love that we have for our children not blind us to their flaws and the mistakes they are making. Let our Putra Moha not make us insensitive to the pain of others. For we have no bloody business to ruin the lives of other people to safeguard our own. And as parents, let’s make it our business to infuse such life lessons in our children!